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ABSTRACT

Arguing that eliminating formal grammar instruction and concentrating instead on instruction in style and organization will improve the program, this paper describes Tulane University's language orientation program for foreign students in the M.B.A. program. Following an introduction, the paper describes the students in the class and the nature of the writing section of the course, and then analyzes the techniques used in teaching writing. This section includes writing samples that characterize the culture-based writing problems of the Latin and Oriental students in the course, and discusses test scores indicating that the students' writing improved during the five-week course but that their knowledge of grammar did not. The paper concludes that instructors should treat grammar problems as they arise within the framework of the group discussions, and that they should emphasize exercises which develop the students' organizational abilities as well as style. (HTH)

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AN ORIENTATION PROGRAM FOR M.B.A. FOREIGN STUDENTS: DIRECTIONS AND QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to describe the language orientation program Tulane University's Graduate School of Business has designed for its M.B.A. foreign students and to question how the writing section of this program might be improved. My contention is that the writing portion of the program could be improved by eliminating formal grammar instruction from it and concentrating instead on instruction in style and organization.

INTRODUCTION

The orientation program Tulane University's Graduate School of Business provides for its M.B.A. foreign students is an intensive five-week course which aims to improve the students' reading, writing, and oral comprehension abilities in English, which is, of course, their second language. The course also aims to acclimate the students to their new cultural environment. This course was the first of its kind and remains one of the few in the nation. It originated six years ago when the Business School found that many of its foreign students had almost insurmountable difficulties succeeding in their studies when faced with adjusting to using a language in which they were not yet fully proficient, settling themselves and their families into a new home, and beginning their course work all in the matter of a week, or sometimes even less. As one of the two instructors who designed and taught the orientation course in the summer of 1983, I saw a marked improvement in my students' skills and in their confidence. I hope through this paper to show the value of this course and the others like it which have recently appeared.

The subtitle of my paper, "Directions and Questions," implies its structure. I will describe the directions our course took, and then I will raise questions as to how we could improve it. The questions I have to raise concern the benefits of teaching grammar in the writing section of our course. But before I pursue those questions, I want to give a general description of the course using the 1983 summer orientation as an example.

CS209105

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The class was composed of nine men who ranged in age from 21 to 33. There were two cultural groups in our class--the Latin Americans and the Orientals. Three of our Latin Americans were Mexican. One was from Santo Domingo, and the other was a Cuban-born Chilean citizen. Four of the five Latins were engineers. Two of them were industrial engineers; one, a petroleum engineer; and one, a chemical engineer who was also one of the three chief negotiators for Cydsa, the Mexican oil conglomerate. Our fifth Latin student was a cost accounting professor from the University of Chile. Among the four orientals we had one Taiwanese, who had been a financial lieutenant in his nation's army, and three Japanese--a cost accountant who had worked eight years for Exxon in Japan, a securities investment analyst, and a managerial consultant to a construction firm whose aim in getting the MBA was, as he said, "to honorably and capably succeed my father in his construction business."

These students, with one exception, were all able to carry on an understandable if somewhat halting and ungrammatical conversation in English. There was a certain amount of variation in the levels of proficiency they had attained, but it was not so great that we thought we should split them into groups based on these levels. After arriving in New Orleans they faced the same problems that an American might face upon arriving in France or Germany with unpracticed language skills and with a limited knowledge of the culture. Part of our job was to minimize the problems our students faced in settling themselves into a new home and an unfamiliar society. Four of our students were married. One young wife was brave enough to drive up with her husband from Mexico, but the other three married men had to set up their households on their own prior to their wives' arrivals. Two of them had children, and one even brought his mother-in-law along. Finding housing in Uptown New Orleans is not easy since the area has a 98 percent occupancy rate. We spent a good portion of the first week of class helping our students to rent and furnish apartments, to find schools for their children, to set up bank accounts, and to get American driving licenses.

On the whole our students were a very independent group. Several of the Latins, being great hagglers, became enamored of garage sales. The Orientals seemed to have a bit more trouble perhaps because their culture is so very different from ours. It seemed to me that their main problem, if it can be called one, is that they were too polite. One of the Orientals, a small, deferential man had trouble with his New Orleans bank over money that was being sent from Colorado. Prior to coming to us he had been at the Economic Institute at Boulder. He also had trouble with the driver's license bureau--when he went on his own he was turned away. He returned on both occasions obviously frustrated and angry but still mannerly. He said, "I do not understand American system. It is most inefficient."

Ultimately we did help solve these difficulties and those of our other students. Once we had settled most of their personal difficulties, we demanded more of them in the classroom. We made them read, write, and speak English from 9:00 to 3:00 Monday through Friday. I might add here that some fast friendships developed between the Latins and the Orientals, and since English was their common language, this helped our cause as well. The course covered three main areas: report writing, oral presentations, and computer skills. First I will give a brief description of each of the areas of the course, and then I will go into greater depth in discussing the writing section of the course.

Report Writing

As a diagnostic exercise, the students took the Test of Standard Written English. From the results, we decided which areas of grammar needed attention. Each week we instructors treated several grammar problems found from the test and from the students' writing. During the first two-three weeks of the course, the students wrote summaries of Wall Street Journal articles. We evaluated these with the students, pointing out key problems, and explaining standard organizational techniques of English composition. During the last weeks of the course, the students wrote case studies and typed them on the word processor. The grader who marks the papers for the Management Communications Course evaluated these studies.

Oral Presentations

Once a week each student wrote and delivered a videotaped speech. With the class we reviewed each speech and suggested methods to improve the students' delivery. These included attention to pronunciation and enunciation problems, gestures, and techniques for using visual aids.

Computer Skills

Students learned to use the word processor at the Business School Computer Center in order to type their case studies. They also learned to use the computer spreadsheet in preparation for their accounting courses.

ANALYSIS OF TECHNIQUES USED IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Since my main interests lie in the teaching of writing, I will focus the remainder of my paper on that section of the course. I will analyze some samples of the students' writing from both the beginning and the end of the course. The first group of sentences comes from the summaries of Wall Street Journal articles. The students did five of these, two a week, except for the first week. Then in the fourth and fifth weeks we went on to the case studies. The

students were to write at least one page. They were to begin by stating the main idea of the piece. We encouraged them to include an evaluation of the article if they felt they could comment on the topic. In each of these assignments the students were to read two articles and to write on one of them. We broke into two groups to discuss their assignments, each of the two instructors taking a group. Each group was mixed; that is, each included writers who had written on both articles. In this way we gave them more exposure to both reading and writing. We found these assingments helpful in their developing an American business vocabulary. I will now provide some writing samples taken from these assignments by various Latin and Oriental students. Clearly the results were, at first, hardly encouraging.

Latin American Writer I

This newspaper article is a good example of what happens when a person that doesn't know about one specific topic tries to comment an issue in that topic. This article is what I stress at the beginning of this paragraph, or the articulist didn't pay the corresponding attention to the subject he was writing.

Latin American Writer II

The four world's major commercial aircraft builders; Boeing, McDonnell Douglas, Airbus Industrie, and Lockheed California Co. have very serious problems with planes secondhand taked on order to sell new models. They are thinking seriously about get into the used plane business.

Oriental Writer

Reagan proposed a 10-year extention the trade program, known as Generalized System of Preference. Reagan introduces a consept of reciprocity, which would adjust the benefits, attribute to the law, to give generous duty terms to the poorer countries and less opportunities from the richer countries such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Mexico, Brazil, and Singapore.

In the passage by the first Latin American writer, there are, of course, the obvious spelling problems and the strange creation, articulist, instead of writer. But perhaps a bigger problem than these is that the student doesn't know some of the two-word or three-word English verbs. He does know pay attention to, but he doesn't know comment on or write about.

The second Latin American student's writing shows his native Spanish interfering with his new language when he places the adjective after the noun--planes secondhand instead of the correct version. He too is having a problem with verb forms. He doesn't yet know thinking about getting. But more interesting than these problems is his problem with the order of the adjectives at the beginning of the first sentence. Here it is clear that he has learned the

rules but not the exceptions. Usually the numerical adjective would come before the others as in, for example, four black hats or two tall men, but, in this sentence the possessive, world's, calls for him to know an exception to the rule about the numerical adjective.

The Oriental writer has problems with spelling, with prepositions, and with articles. He doesn't know it should be extension of, and he commits a characteristic Oriental mistake by omitting the at the end of the first sentence. He does know the verb to attribute to, but he doesn't know that in this case he needs the past participle. In the last sentence he tries to employ to give to and to take from, but he hasn't learned the idiomatic usage of this combination of verbs yet.

These are typical sentences from the students' writing during the early weeks of the course. They show that while our situation certainly wasn't hopeless, our students still had a great deal of work to do if they were to be prepared to compete with their American peers at the beginning of the fall semester.

I might also note here that I discovered other problems common to the language groups in our class. The Orientals, at first, had problems with organization. They were a bit bemused by my instructions to put the most important idea first. They told me that they had been trained to put the most important idea last. Through repeating these short assignments with the Wall Street Journal articles we accustomed them to putting the most important idea first so that when they started writing business reports they would understand the concept of the introductory summary, which, of course, is an important portion of the American business report.

The Latins also had characteristic problems. A common problem I noted in their writing was a tendency to write long, wordy, and convoluted sentences. This, no doubt, is the result of the more discursive nature of their language. We worked to correct this problem by having them do exercises in editing for conciseness.

We also worked with both groups on forecasting, organization, transitions, and grammar. We did a few grammar exercises on problems such as fragments, fused sentences, and misplaced modifiers each week. I would like to question how effective teaching grammar is in developing better writing skills. But first let me show that our students did develop, did progress as writers, by taking a brief look at a few more samples of our students' writing. Here are the same students at the end of the course writing a case study about a problem a branch store in the Lucky Jim chain is having with shoplifting. The students were to assume the role of outside consultants hired by Lucky Jim to help solve the problem. In the first portion of their study, they were to state the problem as they saw it.

Latin Writer I

As you requested I am sending the following analysis of why your branch store #5 is having problems detecting and controling increasing shoplifting in recent years. Your branch store #5 is also facing a growing community discontent against the store because of the store's get-tough policy, set forth to stop the shoplifting.

Latin Writer II

In recent years, the Lucky Jim discount store located in a high-income neighborhood near a major midwestern university has had very drastic shoplifting losses. This situation is worse if you consider that this store has been one of the more profitable of this chain. So, the manager decided to act, but the policy he chose, prosecuting all shoplifters, is damaging the store. The Lucky Jim company is getting a very bad image.

Oriental Writer

Subject: Protection of the store's assets from shoplifters and the effect of policies concerning shoplifting.

As you requested I am sending an analysis of the situation which arose from the new policies to protect merchandise from shoplifters. In addition, I would like to make a few recommendations on a possible plan of action.

Your new policies, which are hiring a detective, furnishing additional special mirrors, and prosecuting all arrested shoplifters, have effectively worked in terms of reducing shoplifting arrests as well as losses. However, the policies have produced another problem by causing ill will against Lucky Jim in the comunity.

The first Latin American writer and the Oriental are still having a few problems with spelling, but, on the whole, the level of writing is certainly more advanced. The structures these writers use are much more sophisticated structures than they employed in the previous samples. They can now skillfully use parallelism. The first Latin American writer begins by talking about detecting and controlling shoplifting; and the Oriental writer, in his second paragraph, uses hiring, furnishing, and prosecuting in a parallel series. The second Latin American writer uses the appositive, prosecuting all shoplifters, and the Oriental, in beginning his second paragraph, chooses a relative clause. He is also more adept at transitions in this passage, using in addition and however to connect his ideas.

I believe that the contrast between the levels of sophistication in the two sets of sample sentences shows that our students did progress. The question I wish to raise is--Why? Which of our techniques benefitted them and which did not? These questions occurred to me when I saw the students' scores when they took the Test of Standard Written English for the second time. As I mentioned earlier,

they took the test first during the orientation program, and then they took it again along with the American students as they all entered the Management Communications Skills Program. Only two of our students bettered their scores on the test, one only by one point. One even fell from a score of 35 out of a possible 50 at the first testing to a score of three at the second testing. Their writing had improved, but their knowledge of grammar had not. I concluded from these results that much of the time we spent teaching grammar would have been better spent in other activities. I believe the time we spent best was in having our students write and in discussing their writing carefully with them. I also believe the time we asked them to spend in revising their work helped them develop into more sophisticated writers. However, I believe our teaching grammar did more to calm their anxieties than to improve their writing.

I realize that I am basing my conclusions on the test results of a very small and unique group of students. Our class was composed of only nine students who came from widely different backgrounds. Many influences which I cannot hope to chart affected their development as writers. In addition, we taught them for only five weeks--less than half a semester's time. Since the bases for my conclusion did not come from carefully monitored long-term research, I decided to look into some of the thorough research projects which have been done on the relation of teaching grammar to the development of writing skills. There are many studies on both sides of this unresolved issue. A good summary of the various studies which have been done on the question is an article by Richard Larson (1979) called "Language Studies and the Composing Process." It can be found in the collection Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition edited by Donald McQuade. One of the contentions of this article is that several of the studies which support the teaching of grammar are flawed or limited in some way. The most thorough study of the question was done in New Zealand over a period of two years using three classes of high school students. The results of this study are published in the article, "The Role of Grammar in a Secondary School English Curriculum," by Elley, Barham, Lamb, and Wyllie (1976), in Research in the Teaching of English. This study was specifically concerned with discovering the effect of teaching transformational grammar on the development of writing skills. One group of students studied transformational grammar; another, traditional grammar; and the last did a great deal of reading and writing but studied no formal grammar during the three years. At the end of the three years the researchers concluded that the effects of grammar study are negligible. According to them, "It is difficult to escape the conclusion that English grammar, whether transformational or traditional, has virtually no influence on language growth." They posit that the only result the teaching of grammar seems to have is developing in the students a less positive attitude toward their language studies.

How many writing teachers can remember teaching grammar classes in which the students were terribly bored? But the teachers plowed ahead through the boredom because they thought their students

needed grammar. My students this summer felt they needed grammar in order to succeed in their M.B.A. studies. They were well-educated people who probably write well in their own languages. Having learned most of the language skills which they felt helped them to do this as children, they thought if they could only master English grammar and learn English spelling, they would have won the battle. One even specifically asked us to teach him English spelling rules. Our students were far more interested in grammar than most of the students to whom I have taught grammar. Being adults, they saw some reason for knowing grammar besides passing English 102. However I do remember spending a few hours teaching grammar to them on sunny summer afternoons when I got the distinct impression that my students were bored. I do not think that our teaching grammar helped our students. Therefore I think we should probably eliminate formal grammar instruction from our course.

CONCLUSION

I believe that we should treat grammar problems as they arise within the framework of our group sessions on writing and that we should emphasize exercises which develop the students' organizational abilities as well as their style. Among our most beneficial sessions were those on the importance of finding the organizing idea and putting it first. Our sessions on forecasting an organization and following through on that organization were also very important as were our sessions on choosing meaningful evidence. And our sessions on style--editing for conciseness, using parallelism, and employing appropriate transitions were, I believe, very effective. I believe our attention in these areas helped our students to develop their writing ability in English far more than our teaching grammar did.

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